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Book Review: High Politics in the Low Countries: An Empirical Study of Coalition Agreements in Belgium and The Netherlands

André Krouwel

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funding of campaigns. However, they are just as persuasive in intimating that cultural capital would significantly bias who would run for office and who would advise candidates regardless of the nature of funding. Yes, it's all about relationships indeed.

Robin Kolodny
Temple University

Arco I. Timmermans, *High Politics in the Low Countries: An Empirical Study of Coalition Agreements in Belgium and The Netherlands*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003. €45.00 (hbk), vii + 168 pp. ISBN 0 7546 1559 6.

Although consensus democracy remains a dominant concept in political science more than 30 years after it was introduced by several observers of political systems in Switzerland, Austria, Belgium and The Netherlands, its working has never been adequately explained. This is mainly due to the fact that two of its characteristics, broad elite cooperation and informal (or even secret) policy bargaining, have never been defined, operationalized and measured unambiguously. Moreover, (neo-)institutional theories are still unable to clearly differentiate between formal and informal institutions, let alone to analyse the functioning and effect of the latter. A study into this 'black box' of consensus democracy is therefore long overdue.

In a recent attempt, Timmermans has tried to get a scientific foot in this particular door by exploring the role and effects of coalition agreements between political parties taking office together in Belgium and The Netherlands. He argues that the manner and extent to which 'controversial issues' are dealt with in the first crucial stage of government formation determines the policy payoffs that parties achieve during the coalition; which, in turn, explains the survival of the ensuing governments. The main findings of this study are that: periods of coalition formation are important moments for policy formulation at the national level; coalition formation has an agenda-setting function which is used by parties as a mechanism for conflict prevention (hence the increasing length of coalition agreements); coalition agreements are also used to limit the scope of the government's actions, not only to make substantive policy decisions; and that mechanisms of mutual control in a coalition are crucial to its survival.

After a very short overview of research into coalitions, Timmermans tries to come to grips with the functions and effects of coalition agreements. Unfortunately, no clear conceptual and analytic framework is developed before the study moves on to five case studies of coalition governments in Belgium in the 1970s and The Netherlands in the 1980s and 1990s. In the case studies, Timmermans first analyses the types of arrangements in different policy fields by differentiating between explicit and implicit compromises (following Luebbert), the latter

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also being subdivided into procedural and substantive types of arrangements. However, Timmermans does not provide a distinct operationalization of the differences between controversial and non-controversial issues, nor what makes an arrangement procedural or substantive. Explicit compromises are considered substantive and detailed, while implicit compromises are defined as agreements to disagree and 'may consist of procedural arrangements such as postponements or statements which are sufficiently general or vague that none of the parties sees its preferences violated' (p. 24). On page 36, the author even confuses the reader further by defining explicit compromises as 'arrangements in coalition agreements that contain clear and doable substantive intentions'. And further down: 'Substantive implicit compromises are much less specific, and for this reason they are less committing'.

Are explicit and implicit substantive compromises now still mutually exclusive? Are implicit agreements undoable by definition? How do we determine that implicit agreements have been implemented as Timmermans concludes on pages 51, 68, 104 and 126? And what are the criteria for determining whether an arrangement is implicit or explicit, more or less specific, substantive or procedural, doable and implemented or not? None of these conceptual issues are adequately addressed. While the author states that his analysis requires that these key concepts are well defined, they are dealt with in less than two pages. Chapter 3 also discusses some conceptual elements, but these are not taken on board when the key concepts are briefly summarized in Chapter 4. In sum, the book clearly lacks a chapter that explains the author's approach to key concepts and categorizations. In terms of the empirical analysis, it remains unclear in what manner the manifest and substantive conflicts that have been identified, and why certain parts of the coalition agreement documents, are considered less relevant. How, then, can we establish what level of conflict existed between the coalition partners on each of the policy issues?

A similar lack of conceptual and analytic clarity is found in the analysis of the effects of the coalition agreements. Again, on page 23, Timmermans argues that only certain sections of coalition agreements are relevant as some issues are simply included in these documents to meet the expectations of followers or the general public, while parties do not care too much about them. Without an empirical or theoretical foundation for this rather bold claim, Timmermans only focuses on issues that were controversial during government formation in order to establish which policies have been implemented.

Problems also arise with the case selection. First, the author introduces a substantial amount of extraneous variation by analysing cases from different decades in the two countries (the 1970s in Belgium and the 1980s and 1990s in The Netherlands). Secondly, according to Timmermans, the case selection is based on the 'variation in coalition performance, that is the duration of governments and their reputation in policy making, of which implementation of the coalition agreement is a part' (p. 32), while party composition (coalition size and ideological profile) is also taken into account. While, in both countries, governments with varying lifespans are studied, it is not clear why three cases from The Netherlands are selected and only two from Belgium. In addition, only five party governments are studied in Belgium, while in The Netherlands only two and three party coalitions were included. Including durable Dutch five party coalitions would have been possible (the Den Uyl government of 1973–77, for

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example) as well as durable Belgian coalitions that only included Christian democratic and social democratic parties (the first Dehaene government of 1992–95). And why not include the fifth Martens government of Christian democrats and liberals as a Belgian equivalent to the first Dutch Lubbers government? How did the author establish the ideological profile (the level of polarization between the coalition partners)? Coupled with the weakly developed analytical framework, this imbalance in the case selection has serious consequences for the external validity for the findings, which is problematic in an exploratory and theory-generating case study.

Timmermans has attempted to fill boldly one of the serious gaps in political science at the interface of formal and informal institutions. In order to make institutionalism more dynamic (not regarding institutions as a given but as constantly changing and developing parameters of political behaviour) and more empirical we need to develop concepts and theories for analysing political phenomena such as coalition formations. During these formation processes, coalition agreements are made in an 'institutionalised extra-institutional arena', largely behind closed doors, and in various stages in which many actors are involved. Since most of us will never sit at the negotiating table, political scientists have to find ways to peek behind these closed doors so that we can better understand the process of policy formation, explain cabinet duration and observe important aspects of political party behaviour.

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Steve Ludlam and Martin J. Smith (eds), *Governing as New Labour: Policy and Politics Under Blair*.
Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004. £16.99 (pb.), xiii + 261 pp.
ISBN 1 4039 X.

This book surveys the whole of Labour's first term of office and the first half of its second term with the object of assessing the claim that New Labour has embarked on the modernization of social democracy in Britain (p. viii). The book inevitably considers how far the Government has succeeded in matching its reform programme with its stated objectives. The 13 chapters cover policy areas such as: the economy, welfare, public services, constitutional reform, foreign and European affairs, and the work of the Home Office, as well as such matters as Labour's electoral base, its intra-party politics and its relationship with the trade unions and the media. There is also a brief discussion comparing New Labour with some of its continental counterparts.

New Labour famously insisted on the need for two terms to achieve its key policy objectives. This now looks a trifle optimistic in areas such as welfare state reform, public services and infrastructural modernization. New Labour assumes that social change and changes in voting behaviour have made 'Middle England'

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